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SUBJECT: GAY PRIDE MARCH CALM DESPITE OPPOSITION

¶1. Summary: The May 16 Baltic Pride parade in Riga drew about 300 participants and a far larger crowd of protestors, but it avoided the problems of violence and overzealous security seen in previous years. The event took place despite a late move by some members of the Riga City Council to revoke the event's permit. The effort was seen by many as overtly political, and was overruled by the courts. The political maneuvering before the event and the anti-gay demonstrators outnumbering Pride participants illustrate the challenges still facing the LGBT community in Latvia. This was the first year that the event was billed as being Baltic-wide. Next year, it is scheduled to take place in Vilnius, and won't return to Riga until 2012. End summary.

¶2. Latvian gay rights group Mozaika held a series of events to mark "Friendship Days," the most contentious of which was the annual Pride Parade. Three years ago, the march was banned and the event was marked by violent clashes between anti-gay protestors, Pride participants, and police. Last year the event was held in a less visible location, and under security so tight that Mozaika complained many legitimate participants were turned away.

¶3. This year, the City of Riga granted Mozaika permission on May 8 to return to a more visible location, marching in the streets adjacent to a central city park. However, just days before the march, 34 of the 60 members of the Riga City Council signed a letter declaring that the permit had been issued inappropriately and that the Pride March was a security risk. This group succeeded in forcing withdrawal of Mozaika's permit on Thursday, May 14. The next day, Mozaika claimed in court that there was no legal basis to revoke the permit, especially so soon before the event. The court ruled in Mozaika's favor, and the permit was reinstated. Mozaika leader Linda Freimane described the City Council's efforts as blatant political posturing before the June municipal elections, but credited the city manager as behaving professionally despite the political pressure.

¶4. The event attracted a small crowd that was in good spirits, though the parade was a subdued stroll compared to the rambunctious affairs surrounding pride parades in many countries. An estimated 300 participants carried flags and signs along two city blocks forming the perimeter of a city park. Many Latvian homosexuals fear the potential repercussions of being seen at the Pride March and choose not to attend. Many of the participants were visitors from abroad. Lithuania and Estonia were represented, but far larger groups came from the UK and Nordic states. Unlike last year, Mozaika did not report any problems with security for participants entering the park.

¶5. On the other side of metal barricades and riot police, about 500 anti-gay demonstrators gathered to jeer at the parade. They carried signs that ranged from bible verses to slogans linking gays to AIDS, Latvian population decline, and pedophilia. In contrast to prior years, there were no physical attacks and the protestors did not throw anything at the Pride participants.

¶6. Riga will not face this situation again next year: Baltic Pride events will begin to rotate locations, going to Vilnius in 2010 and Tallinn in 2011 before returning to Riga. This strategy may spread the message further, but risks losing the momentum that the Pride events have built here - or, at least, risks losing the chance for

Latvians to grow bored of the annual fight and see the Pride March as commonplace.

¶5. Comment: This year's event was a minor success. The courts protected Mozaika's freedom of assembly and speech, and the event, while emotional, never seemed at risk the kind of confrontations seen in the past. However, for the politicians facing an election in a few weeks, pushing to ban the event is probably a vote-winner as intolerance of homosexuality still runs deep in Latvia.

WASER